11: Boyd H-4, 5 (1953) 1958
NU34 Tarasco NU34

SESIHÁNGARI

Historical Comment

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Tarascan kingdom extended into the present states of Jalisco, Colima, and Guerrero, and thereby reached its greatest limits of expansion. King Zuangua (called Singuangua in the following legend of Sesihángari) ruled over this vast area not only as the highest political authority but also as the representative and incarnation of the primordial god Curicaueri. Thus he had the twofold responsibility of ruling the country and maintaining the cult of the god.

In respect to this latter duty, the king had a woman known as the *quataperi* who supervised all the women of the royal household, including the group comprised of daughters of important men of the empire. These women passed their days preparing items to be used as offerings to the god and were permitted to leave the royal enclosure only at the time of fiestas.

The story of one of these young women is a Tarascan tradition that was carefully and secretly transmitted from generation to generation, never being disclosed to outsiders until the wars of revolution in the early nineteenth century. At that time it became known when the Indians openly applauded the noble virtues displayed by Sesihángari in the face of adversity. As thousands of their countrymen fell into more desperate circumstances, this legend was popularized. Sesihángari's acceptance of death for that which she held dear in the face of evil oppression became a staunch subject of reference for the nineteenth-century Indian revolutionaries.

The Legend

Sesihángari, the strikingly beautiful daughter of the cacique of Patamban, was brought to the Purépecha court. Upon her arrival in the royal city of Tzintzuntzan, the ladies of the court crowned her with flowers on the steps of the palace and dressed her in a

11: Boyd H-4, 5 (1953) 1958
NU34 Tarasco NU34

white robe lined with beautiful colors.

The ancient king Singuangua, upon beholding her, was dazzled with her youthful beauty. Realizing that it would be unjust to marry her because of his advanced age, the compassionate monarch paternally consecrated her as priestess of the Sun. She was housed in the *guandaperata*, the sacred mansion of the *guananchecha* (vestal virgins) of the cult of Tucupa-acha.

The princess Sesihángari, respecting the Purépecha traditions, graciously accepted the honor which King Singuangua bestowed upon her. Her humility only accentuated her loveliness. She only requested that she be permitted to continue her customary baths in the marvelous medicinal springs found in her father's territory. This the monarch granted with pleasure, appointing a group of the vestals to accompany her. To his surprise the waters seemed to work a miracle among the vestals, for in a short time they returned to court flowing with loveliness.

Intrigued by the phenomenon which converted the vestals into gems of magnificent beauty, the king ordered an investigation to determine the cause of the miraculous transformation. His wise men reported that the change could be traced to the magic power of the sulphureous mud from the enchanted marsh, situated eastward in the mountainous country near Taximaroa (Fig. 1). The boiling waters found there, they said, proceeded from the center of the earth and still contained their divine power.

Prince Tanimaranscua, one of the sons of King Singuangua, and Sesihángari fell deeply in love with one another. The king not only approved of their courtship but silently hoped they would marry. According to custom, a Purépecha priestess could marry only with the king's permission.

Prince Tzimtzicha, who was next in succession to inherit the throne, also loved Sesihángari and was jealous of his younger brother Tanimaranscua.

At length the old king died. His son Tzimtzicha succeeded him, and, according to custom, he took as his wives those of the preceding monarch. However, Tzimtzicha wanted Sesihángari as his wife.

11: Boyd H-4, 5 (1953) 1958
NU34 Tarasco NU34

539 644 173

Fearing his brothers, especially Tanimaranscua, he gave orders that they be killed and the deed was done. The bodies of the murdered princes were still warm when the grief-stricken Sesihángari, with her hair flying in wild disorder, hurriedly took a torch and set fire to the palace where the bodies lay. Tongues of fire darted about and covered the regal mansion. The ceiling gave way, permitting the black smoke to rise heavenward and thereby making the sinister spectacle more awesome.

Among the leaping flames the onlookers saw Sesihángari embracing the body of her beloved Tanimaranscua. Before the horrified eyes of all, their two bodies were consumed in the flames. Thus were the two unified souls released in love and carried heavenward.

For centuries the Purépecha people remembered the terrible sight of the beautiful, grief-stricken princess.

THE DIVINE INCHÁTIRO

Historical Comment

173 539 787 [171]

The folklore of the Indians of Mexico and Central America in pre-Conquest times referred to unusual omens—comets, burning temples, and dreams—which warned of the arrival of a strange people. The Tarascans were not exceptional in this respect (Ramirez, 1903, pp. 11-12). King Zuangua at the nerve center of the empire in Tzintzuntzan and his vassal princes at Tingambato, Coyucán, and elsewhere were sitting in their political offices, fearful lest the sands of time were running out for the Tarascans.

[643] [631] [645]

173 539 [487]

In the legend of Inchátiro those uneasy times are brought back like a breath of the past. Tingambato, the home of Camachuén, was, and still is, an important stopping point on a trail leading from La Sierra southeast to the Tierra Caliente (Fig. 1).

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Since the time of Tariácuri at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Tarascans and Aztecs fought over the Tierra Caliente (Fig. 2).[1] The Matlaltzincas, sometimes called Pirindas, were said to have aided the Tarascans against the Aztecs. For this assis-

[1] [See Category 116, P. 5 -- Analyst]